

## **As Stephen Harper goes off-script, will an agenda emerge?**

**Dismal polling suggests an impasse, and lots of improvising.**

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by *Ish Theilheimer*

Canada's minority Prime Minister Stephen Harper is often accused of having a secret agenda. If he has a secret, it may be a good time to haul one out, or maybe it will just come out.

Tuesday's SES poll indicates the Conservatives and Liberals in a virtual dead-heat (32-33 percent), the NDP close to its historic high at 17 percent, and the Greens nosing out the BQ for the first time ever, 9-10 percent. Pollster Nik Nanos calls Quebec a "seesaw", where the Liberals and the Harporcrites go up and down. Harper's support is badly hurt by Afghanistan war losses.

Now is the time the situation gets sticky for Harper. His strategy has always been to appeal to the urban middle class and to play down the extremist views within his party to woo the urban vote. That strategy hit a record high a couple of months ago. Now it appears to be out of gas.

### **Harper's obsession has always been tactical: developing a party he could sell to Easterners, and then marketing it.**

Harper ran for government in 2006 with five main so-called priorities — lower taxes, shorter hospital wait times, choice in child care, cracking down on crime, and political accountability — while strictly disciplining candidates and caucus members not to air extreme views. These five "priorities" were easy to market and relatively easy to be seen to move on. Left off the list were some of Canada's biggest and most difficult challenges, including Aboriginal poverty and global warming. Harper walked away from done deals on both issues — the Kelowna and Kyoto accords.

This strategy might well have worked if he had had the opportunity to return quickly, as hoped, to the polls. He has cut the GST, given out money to parents, trotted out accountability and crime and health care strategies and legislation. He's met his priorities.

Then came the Clean Air Act, which immediately got thumbs down from people with slightly more cred than John Baird, eg David Suzuki and Al Gore. And, of course, there was the federal budget and the costly spat with resource-producing provinces not named Alberta — like Saskatchewan and Newfoundland.

As observed in last week's column, Harper appears, for the moment to have peaked, and unless the opposition forces an election — still a possibility more remote than the most distant planet — he won't be going to the polls any time soon. But winds can change, and the question remains: what is the guy trying to accomplish?

Harper has taken pains to assure voters that he does not have a harsh agenda. Medicare and other social programs remain intact and, so far, largely unassailed by Harper's minority. In making a sweeping range of promises while campaigning and then distributing a broad range of substantial benefits — with no long-term program commitments in the budget — the Conservatives took big steps to calm voter fear.

Harper has conducted a continuous campaign to reassure voters of his benign intentions. From human rights in China to supporting Bill Gates on AIDS research, reaching out to new Canadians through the Head Tax apology and taxing income

trusts, Harper has shown a penchant for bold symbolism to demonstrate his social compassion during his period as minority prime minister. These moves have consistently baffled the news media and supporters like Gerry Nicholls, who was fired by the National Citizens Coalition in March for speaking out against Harper's government. They stand in sharp contrast with Harper's 20 years of working for far-right wing causes.

Viewed in the context of Harper's battles with ideologues of "social conservatism" like Manning, Day and Nicholls, these moves are more understandable. Harper, an evangelical Christian himself, does not disagree about philosophy with any of these colleagues. His obsession has always been tactical: developing a party he could sell to Easterners, and then marketing it.

Journalist Paul Wells wrote in his 2006 book *Right Side Up*, that Harper always saw limits to rural populism and sought a strategy to woo urban voters. He quotes a Harper memo to Preston Manning from 1989 saying the Reform Party "should tailor its broader, 'social' agenda to gain a sizeable chunk of the urban working class and rural sector 'swing' votes, without alienating its urban private sector middle-class 'core.' The key is to emphasize moderate, conservative social values consistent with the traditional family, the market economy, and patriotism."

Wells stated that Harper's agenda is to make the Conservatives a national party and to replace the Liberals as the dominant party. His analysis is that a radical right-wing agenda would contradict Harper's plan to woo the middle.

We don't really know exactly what Harper's long-term goals are because he is so poker-faced about it all. We know something of his past, though. As NCC president, for instance, he headed an organization that preaches "more freedom through less government."

Now we won't tell Canadians which national programs — medicare, children's programs, Aboriginal housing, employment — would feel the knife if he had the reins all to himself. It's no wonder poll numbers reflect nervousness and outright rejection. Now that Harper has moved on his five "priorities," increasingly he is going off script and improvising. Canadians may well learn more of what's on his mind.

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